ALWAYS REFORMING
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"Then they said to him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink." Jesus said to them, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"
Luke 5:33-39 (NRSV)

What an auspicious occasion this is. With a lot happening in the life of this particular community of God's people —The Lake Forest Presbyterian Church. And what an auspicious time: after 150 years of faithful ministry, and the publication of what may be the best history of a Christian Church outside of the pages of the New Testament. I've spent some time with this book. It is imaginatively conceived, carefully researched, eloquently written and handsomely published. You and Christine Chakoian are to be congratulated. I know a little bit about ministry and about books. I know the strenuous demands that go with both. To do them both at the same time, with such grace, such care for detail, and such devotion is a major accomplishment.

It is only fair, at this point, to acknowledge that Chris is a very good friend of mine and a former colleague. She did not invite me to preach this

morning because she knew I would say nice things about her. In fact, I know that is not her style. But I simply must say again that Christine Chakoian is one of the best of us, a Presbyterian minister of high intelligence, intellectual breadth and spiritual depth and a deep commitment to the Church. Her leadership here, as you know, has been a great gift — to you, to the Lake Forest Community and to the PCUSA. It is simply good to be here, with her, on this occasion.

It is also a lovely concurrence of two occasions in the church year: Reformation Sunday and All Saints Day next Friday. The book is the record and celebration of the Saints of this Church. The day is an occasion to think about and thank God for those people whose strong and generous faith established the church and handed it on to future generations—of which you are the latest. And it is an occasion to remember your personal saints; those people who taught you to believe, who gave Christian faith to you; these people who loved you without condition even while you were not particularly loveable; those people who saw more in you than you saw in yourself, who cared enough about you to call out of you more than you ever imagined was there Carlyle Marney used to call them our “balcony people,” the ones, now gone, are up there in the balcony of our lives, looking down at us, keeping watch. All Saints Day is a day to look up at them, remember them and wave to them: your parents, grandparents, teachers, professors, coaches— your balcony people.

And Reformation Sunday is a great time for a congregation like this one to look back into the past and remember who you are, and forward to the future, to what you are called to become. The Motto of the Reformations is “Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda”: The Church reformed and always reforming.

Reformation Sunday used to be an occasion for thinking about events that happened in Germany 500 years ago, bash the Pope, and trot out all the reasons we are grateful that we’re not Catholic. Many of us, years ago, grew up in a climate of interfaith wariness that bordered on hostility. We weren’t entirely sure Catholics were Christians, and they returned the compliment. Catholics weren’t allowed to step inside Protestant churches. Protestants made fun of Latin Masses, confessionals, fish on Friday, and, in my household at least, held the weekly hope that the Notre Dame football team would lose on Saturday afternoon. Garrison Keillor, in his book *Life among Lutherans*, a collection of *Prairie Home Companion* monologues,

says that for the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon, intolerance towards Catholics was part of the faith. “We believed Catholics were illiterate peasants, foreign born, who worshiped idols. . . . We weren’t sure what it was that Catholics believed, but whatever it was, it wasn’t right” (p. 170). Catholic-Protestant marriages used to be called mixed marriages, and the weddings themselves often became battles for religious supremacy. I was solemnly instructed in Sunday School to avoid all of that by not ever dating Catholic girls (which was fine with me, because I already had my eyes on a Lutheran).

All of that is past, thanks be to God. Not the Lutheran—that has turned out well for me. But there is an important truth that remains for all of us, and it began one day, long before the Reformation, when Jesus sat down for dinner in the home of a man named Levi. It happens early in the story. A young rabbi from Nazareth, beginning in his home synagogue, has begun to teach and preach in the villages of Galilee, announcing that the kingdom of God has come and with it a whole new way of being faithful to God. Wherever he goes, people are paying attention. He teaches love and forgiveness in addition to abiding by conventional religious rules and customs. He goes around telling people that love for their neighbors, care for the poor and the sick, accepting and welcoming those who are shut out by social custom and religion—people with leprosy, sinners, prostitutes—is more important to God than religious rituals and rules. He takes his religion seriously—so seriously that he wants to reform it, make it be what it intends to be. But to those most invested in the religious status quo, he looks and sounds for all the world like a troublemaker, maybe even subversive—particularly on that day when he sat down for dinner at Levi’s table.

There’s a back story here. Levi was a tax collector. The Romans had invented an innovative way to collect their taxes: they hired locals to do the job for them, paid them generously, and allowed them to overcharge and skim a little off the top. It was lucrative. The only downside was that everybody hated you; you were a “collaborator,” a “traitor.” It was so bad that “tax collectors and sinners” go together as almost one word in the language of the day. Sinners meant anyone who simply didn’t pay attention to the religious law. Often they were poor people who were so busy trying to survive that they didn’t have time for religion. Sinners included beggars, petty thieves, people who were ritually unclean, prostitutes—not the kind of people with whom a respectable person would want to be associated.

One day, out of the blue. Jesus walked by one of these tax booths, looked the tax collector in the eye, said “Follow me,” and, of all the things, Levi, the tax collector, got up and followed. You can build a whole story about why Levi did what he did, about his religious journey or about his selling out his people, his nation and religion, for money; about his guilt; about the fact that he couldn’t look at himself in the mirror; about the fact that all his neighbors considered him a traitor and would have nothing to do with him. Maybe some of that was part of it. All the text says is that Levi got up from his counting table, walked away and followed Jesus, and was apparently so happy with his decision that the first thing he does is go home and plan a big dinner party. And who does he invite, this man everybody detests? He invites the only friends he has—that is, all those who don’t mind being seen with him: other tax collectors, sinners, panhandlers, beggars, and prostitutes and his newest friend, the young rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus. It must have been a boisterous party with lots of laughter. (See Eujoo Mary Kim*, Feasting on the Word* Year B, vol. 1.)

A few proper, upstanding, reputable, civic and religious leaders walk by, see and hear what is happening, see Jesus in there, in the middle of that motley crowd, and ask his disciples, “Why is he doing this: Why is he so disrespecting of our customs and rules?” Jesus overhears and says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician.”

They thought about that for a few minutes. They look again at the people who are now having a great time, truly enjoying themselves, eating, drinking out of big wine goblets, and decide to raise the stakes. “You know fasting and praying are very important to us. All your people seem to be interested in eating, drinking.” Now Jesus is engaged. Maybe he steps outside to talk to them; maybe he remains at the table and raises his voice.

> No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment: otherwise the old will be torn and the piece from the new will not match the old. . . . And no one puts new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine will be put in new wineskins.

There is an important organizational principle in that interchange. Great ideas inevitably create institutions to embody them, to celebrate and protect them, and to implement and express them publically. Monotheism is an abstraction until it creates a religion, creates a temple, creates a

priesthood, creates rituals and creeds and practices. Representative democracy exists not in the abstract but in the institutions it creates: elected legislatures, branches of government, laws and regulations, a judicial system. An internal combustion engine that can power a vehicle in which people can ride in is just a dream until it creates a factory and workers and a management structure and a financial system and a sales force. And in every case the institution, over time, lives in tension with its founding idea, so much so that sometimes the institution itself, its preservation and protection, become the point of the exercise, without anybody realizing what has happened. Thomas Jefferson was so attuned to this dynamic in the eighteenth century that he said, “Every generation needs a new revolution.” So healthy institutions, business, education, industry, non-profits regularly invest time and resources in stepping back to remember what their basic business is and to ask if they are actually doing what they intend to do or if they are investing everything in institutional survival.

There is a fascinating book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why,* by an author with a charming name, Phyllis Tickle, a sociologist of religion. She observes that every 500 years the church, the institutional expression of Christianity, itself a reflection of the ideas and life of Jesus, has a giant rummage sale. Old traditions and structures, forms and practices, are discarded to make room for the new. Beginning with Jesus and the early church, every 500 years there has been a huge disruption, a major shift in the Christian Church: in 500, the fall of Rome and emergence of the papacy and monasticism; in 1000, the great schism between Eastern and Western Christianity, which resulted in Eastern Orthodoxy with its center in Constantinople and Roman Catholicism with its center in Rome; in 1500, the Protestant Reformation, which we remember today.

Phyllis Tickle says three things happen when the church holds an every-500-year rummage sale.

1. A new, vital form of Christianity emerges.
2. The older, dominant form is reconstituted into a less rigid and better expression, and it becomes stronger.
3. Each time the faith spreads dramatically.

You can see what's coming. Phyllis Tickle argues that we are in the middle of an every-500-year rummage sale. Something new is being born, and we can't quite see what it is yet. Older, established structures, forms, and traditions are shaking, some declining and threatening to disappear. The Roman Catholic Church is running out of clergy, out of priests and nuns, its backbone for centuries. Protestant denominations particularly are in a stage of transformation. They are a lot smaller than they used to be. There is exactly half the number of Presbyterians in our denomination as there were fifty years ago. The same is true for Chicago. Something is happening. New churches are emerging. New Christians are finding their way to new churches that don't look anything like what we think churches ought to look like. And here you are, with your English Gothic building and clergy in robes and people singing traditional hymns and, by the way, strong and growing. So I have an idea to add to the every-500-year rummage sale. There are some items in the church's attic that we shouldn't sell, some things so valuable, so precious, that they must remain and be part of what is emerging, to remind whatever is about to be born what is good and faithful and helpful about this tradition. I have concluded that it is why we are here: to embody and keep alive the idea of Reformed, Protestant, Presbyterian Christianity. And I believe we are here not to give way to, but to participate in whatever is emerging out of the ferment that we have always believed is stirred up by the Holy Spirit.

So what's ahead? Whatever it is, it will be determined by a response to what is going on in the world. The Church is called to be in the world and to love the world as passionately as our Lord Jesus Christ did. The world's business is also the Church's business because God so loves the world that God gave an only Son. The founders of the Church, your forebears, lived through times of change and challenge, industrialization, economic uncertainty, war, urbanization and in the midst of it all kept the faith and built the Church.

So for you, God's call is to love the world and respond faithfully in our time of remarkably and accelerating change: globalization, unprecedented racial and cultural diversity, a digital revolution that is affecting how we communicate more radically than anything since the invention of the printing press.

So what's ahead? I think when you start to plan for the future; you go back to the past, to the very beginning, to your roots. I think there is a hint, a picture of what is emerging, what the Spirit of God is stirring up in our age,

in that dinner party in Levi's house two thousand years ago: a religion and religious institution based not so much on getting its beliefs and rules right and theology orthodox as on getting Jesus right, as when he sat down at a tax collector's table; a religion and religious institution based not on keeping people out, away from the table, reserving sacraments for members only, ordination to those judged to be morally pure, but based on the Lord Jesus sitting down at a table with precisely those people his religion called impure, unfit, unclean.

I like to remember Glen Fenema when I find myself wondering about the future of the church.
Glen had AIDS. He grew up in and was a very active member of a church that was vocal about its disapproval of his sexual orientation. He found us through a friend, started attending and joined and literally threw himself into the life of the community that did not reject him because of who he was.

Glen volunteered for mission projects, signed up for a mission trip and never missed worship. His parents, life-long members of their family church, began to attend with him and eventually became members with him.

As his illness advanced, Glen could not always make it to worship on Sunday morning. We signed him up for the CD ministry that delivered the recorded service to his home.
Near the end he was in a hospice facility. On my last visit we talked with more depth and honesty than ever. We talked about his life, his faith. We talked about his dying.
I asked him, what was the hardest part. He told me the hardest part was at night, trying to fall asleep. He was so sick, and at night when all the guests had gone home, and the lights were down, and things were quiet – he was alone with his pain and illness – and the awareness that he was dying.
"That's very hard," he said.

"You know what I do?" he said. I turn on my CD player, and put on my headphones, and listen to the Sunday service at church. I must have a hundred of them. It settles me down. Sometimes I fall asleep right away, during the prelude. I often fall asleep during your sermon (I'm not the only one to do that."

“But almost every night I fall asleep like that, here in my bed, but also in my church.”

And that is why, in spite of everything to the contrary, I remain high on God’s church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

I think the church that will emerge from the rummage sale will be as shockingly inclusive as Jesus was that day long ago, a church that will live out its life in the world as he did, its doors as open as his arms were, its heart as open to the world as his was, its resources as invested in caring for the world and its people as his resources of love and passion, of life and blood that he poured out and gave on the cross. I think the church that is emerging will be as grateful and joyful and confident as his first disciples were after the reality of Easter resurrection sank in, a church that will be compelling because it is useful and faithful to its Lord, a church that knows how to give and to love as its Lord did.
Thanks be to God for this church, for its 150 years of faithful ministry.

Thanks be to God for its vital, compelling life today. And thanks be to God for all that lies ahead.

Amen.